Asking for a fee – even a small one – changes the way people use the outdoors, especially for those with low incomes


Is exploring nature still attractive for people when they have to pay? In new research **Chase C. Lamborn** *and* **Jordan W. Smith** *look at the effects of a $3 charge to access hiking and biking trails in a Utah forest. They find that even a low fee meant that people on low incomes would seek cheaper or free alternatives, often up to three times farther away.*

It's less than the cost of bug spray – but to some people (and their wallets) that amount still matters – and influences where they choose to spend time outdoors. Recreation fees change how people use public lands, even if the charge seems insignificant. For instance, the USDA Forest Service in Utah requires just $3 per vehicle for a day's access to the hiking and biking trails in picturesque Millcreek Canyon, just east of Salt Lake City. But even that amount changes decision-making patterns about where to spend time outdoors for some users, according to our new research.

Millcreek Canyon offers a variety of mountain bike trails, hiking trails, and picnic areas. And because it is so close to Salt Lake City, there is no shortage of people willing to pay the fee. Just 10 miles to the south, in adjacent Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons, there are fee-free recreation settings. These areas offer similar opportunities, but without the need to shell out the cash. But how does a $3 fee change who uses a place?

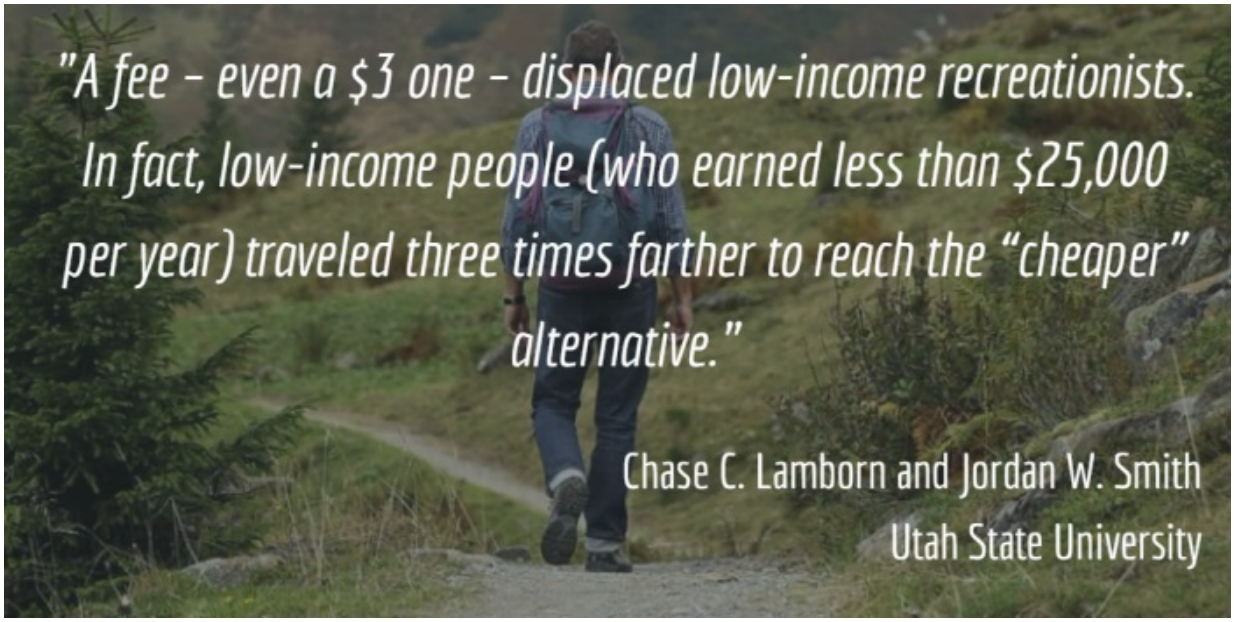
It turns out that fees play a critical role in people's decisions about where to play outdoors. We compared the people who paid a fee to access Millcreek Canyon to people using comparable, but fee-free, destinations nearby. Although there wasn't a difference in the makeup of the overall race, ethnicity, age, or even the types of recreation the two groups participated in, there was a significant difference in annual household incomes between those who chose to use the area requiring a fee, and those who chose to visit the fee-free alternatives. A fee – even a $3 one – displaced low-income recreationists. In fact, low-income people (who earned less than $25,000 per year) traveled three times farther to reach the "cheaper" alternative.

Behavioral economists wouldn't be surprised by this result. Across a wide range of decision-making situations, research has shown that individuals are more responsive to options that are presented as having no cost, even when the alternative options might be extremely marginal (on the order of one or two cents). Behavioral economist Dan Ariely noted that when it comes to attracting the public's attention and influencing their behavior "the difference between two cents and one cent is small. But the difference between one cent and zero is huge!"

Date originally posted: 2017-10-24

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/10/24/asking-for-a-fee-even-a-small-one-changes-the-way-people-use-the-outdoors-especially-for-those-with-low-incomes/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/



The majority of recreation areas in the Central Wasatch Mountains in Utah don't require a fee at all, but that may change. As burgeoning populations around nearby Salt Lake City expand, so does demand for recreation sites. The Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest is considering a $6 per vehicle fee to access areas that have, until now, been free of charge.

Few issues related to the management of outdoor recreation on public lands are as controversial as user fees for access. Some people advocate for fees because they allow public land management agencies to be more self-sufficient and less dependent on unpredictable budget appropriations. Fees provide a much-needed stream of revenue to fund agencies' deferred maintenance backlogs. Plus, they are an indirect, efficient (if unpopular) way to restrict use at an area, limiting impact from rising visitor numbers. But other people consider these benefits irrelevant. Many scientists and advocacy organizations contend that the benefits a management agency may get from fees are irrelevant because public lands should be public and open to all members of a community, not just those who can afford it. Many also believe that on-site fees are actually demanding double payment for a single service (after personal income taxes which go toward the maintenance of public lands).

Both sides are right, which makes this such a sticky scenario for land managers to negotiate.

Our research is hopefully just a start, as it offers compelling behavioral evidence that user fees play a critical role in how low-income individuals choose outdoor recreation settings. More could certainly be done to discover how user fees displace and/or exclude low-income people from participating in outdoor recreation. Not having substitutes available could possibly exclude them from the many associated benefits of the outdoors, such as improved physical and mental health.

This issue will only become more pertinent. The population of the Salt Lake Valley is continuing to expand, and so will the demand for outdoor recreation. If user fees must be considered, land-use and outdoor recreation planners should expect not only a shift in the socioeconomic composition of the visitors to the areas where the fee will be enforced, but also an increased use of nearby fee-free settings. Recreation managers should also ensure some sites remain fee-free to ensure displacement does not become exclusion.

- *This article is based on the paper, 'User fees displace low-income outdoor recreationists' in Landscape and Urban Planning.*

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Date originally posted: 2017-10-24

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/10/24/asking-for-a-fee-even-a-small-one-changes-the-way-people-use-the-outdoors-especially-for-those-with-low-incomes/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/

Shortened URL for this post: **http://bit.ly/2gFeNCQ**

About the authors

Chase C. Lamborn – *Utah State University*
Chase C. Lamborn is a Research Associate and Ph.D. student with the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University. Much of his time is spent developing, coordinating, and reporting the Institute's research. He has worked on a diversity of research from monitoring fish habitat in the Columbia River Basin to studying the visitation, attitudes, and management preferences of people who recreate on public lands.

Jordan W. Smith – *Utah State University*
Jordan W. Smith, Ph.D. is the Director of the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environment and Society at Utah State University. His research examines how humans, particularly outdoor recreationists, make behavioral and planning adaptations in response to changing environmental conditions.

Date originally posted: 2017-10-24

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/10/24/asking-for-a-fee-even-a-small-one-changes-the-way-people-use-the-outdoors-especially-for-those-with-low-incomes/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/